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SUBJECT: CAMEROON'S RELATIONS WITH ITS NEIGHBORS

REF: A. YAOUNDE 961

[1](#)B. YAOUNDE 1057

[1](#)C. YAOUNDE 1046

[1](#)D. 09 ABUJA 2027

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[1](#)F. 09 LAGOS 0465

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: In a December 16 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, the Foreign Ministry's Director for African Affairs said recent visits to Cameroon by the Presidents of Chad and Central African Republic focused on security and regional integration (especially the corruption scandal in the Central African Bank - BEAC). Relations with Equatorial Guinea remain strained but positive ties with Nigeria continue to strengthen. While a gracious host to his counterparts, it is not clear how actively President Biya is seeking a greater regional leadership role. End summary.

Chad and CAR Discuss Security and BEAC

[1](#)2. (SBU) Ministry of External Relations Director for African Affairs and Minister Plenipotentiary Chantal Mfoula Edjomo described Cameroon's relations with its neighbors as "excellent," built on the principle of "peaceful coexistence." The recent visits of Chadian President Idris Deby (October 28-29) and Central African Republic (CAR) President Francois Bozize (December 7-8) focused on two priorities: border security and preparations for the upcoming Central African Economic and Monetary Union (CEMAC) meeting. Edjomo noted that Cameroon suffers the consequences of conflicts in the region, especially trafficking in illicit arms, highway banditry ("coupeurs de routes"), and refugees (Cameroon hosts about 90,000 refugees). The Heads of State worked to resolve these issues, as well as discussing the need to more clearly demarcate their borders. They discussed prospects for the return of refugees, although Edjomo asserted that Cameroon would not turn back refugees.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Reforming the Central African Bank (BEAC) tops the CEMAC agenda, in the wake of recent corruption scandals (ref A). There is a consensus that "the division of responsibility" needs to be reexamined, Edjomo said, noting that the scheduled December CEMAC meeting in Bangui was postponed because of the Copenhagen climate change summit. A new date has not yet been set, although it might be mid-January to coincide with a scheduled meeting of the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC). She noted that the issue of freedom of movement within the region will likely also be discussed since Gabon and Equatorial Guinea still required visas from other CEMAC members.

[1](#)4. (U) The Presidents also discussed economic issues, since both CAR and Chad depend heavily on transport and other economic ties with Cameroon, Edjomo said. (Note: virtually all of Bangui's and western CAR's imports come through Douala. End note.) They talked about projects to improve roads connecting them, to reduce losses on these roads (from banditry and corruption). Biya and Bozize talked about

creating a joint training center for the mining sector.

Equatorial Guinea

15. (SBU) Edjomo acknowledged some tensions with Equatorial Guinea. EG temporarily, unilaterally closed its border with Cameroon because of alleged security concerns, she said. (Note: the border has now been reopened. End note.) The EG government is uncomfortable with the size of the Cameroonian population in the country (which she estimated at 20-30,000) and in June expelled about 1,000 Cameroonians.

Nigeria

16. (SBU) Edjomo praised the "new spirit of relations" with Nigeria which continues to flourish following the handover of Bakassi in 2008. Over the past year, Nigerians participated in a trade fair in Douala and Cameroonian businessmen reciprocated in Calabar. Cameroon hopes at some point in the future to export electricity to Nigeria from Adamoua Region. The neighbors are cooperating in telecommunications and in demarcating the border as part of the UN-sponsored Mixed Commission process (more details septel). Edjomo acknowledged some continuing areas of friction, noting, for example, that the GRC was investigating claims that Nigerians are being harassed by Cameroonian security forces in Bakassi. Cameroonians are frustrated by apparently Nigerian-led pirate and bandit attacks in the Southwest Region (including Bakassi) and offshore.

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Comment

17. (SBU) Cameroon's relationship with its neighbors is generally excellent and improving, with the exception of Equatorial Guinea. Ali Bongo's visit was hailed in the press as "having an air of renewal" and "putting an end to a long rivalry". The recent start of border demarcation is a further sign of stronger Cameroon-Nigeria ties. Relations with Congo-Brazzaville are good, although the GRC has given that country less attention in the past year than other neighbors. During the Deby and Bozize visits, Biya proclaimed "your security is our security," while also discussing the free movement of people, plans to sell Cameroonian power, educational ties, forestry cooperation, the Copenhagen climate change summit and institutional ties, according to the local press. During Deby's visit, both presidents highlighted the importance of the COTCO oil pipeline and the Douala-Ndjemena road connection. According to press reports, President Deby thanked Cameroon for its financial assistance in helping repel rebel attacks.

18. (SBU) EG-Cameroon tensions have been exacerbated in recent years not only by the expulsion of Cameroonians and maritime border disputes but by the 2008 kidnapping by EG of an army colonel who had been granted asylum in Cameroon. Nonetheless, Cameroon and EG have worked together to reform BEAC, cooperated in a September conference to demarcate maritime borders, and met in Mixed Commission meetings to discuss various disputes. According to senior government officials, Biya works to contain bilateral disputes.

19. (SBU) Edjomo preferred not to use the word "leadership" in discussing President Biya's regional role. During his July meeting with French President Sarkozy, Biya had offered to "be available to help" on regional issues, Edjomo said, but his role was largely dictated by his age (76). As the elder statesman in Central Africa, regional heads of state felt they had to consult Biya on major issues, according to Edjomo. Deby and Bozize had initiated contact to visit Cameroon, she said, adding that Biya then "according to protocol" extended an invitation. The September 11 visit of

Ali Bongo was different because he was making a regional tour as a President-elect, she noted (although the BEAC issue, which implicated Gabon, was hot at the time).

¶10. (SBU) Edjomo's view of President Biya as a default regional leader contrasts with the perspective recently offered by senior presidential aide Rene Sadi, who told Ambassador that Biya is more actively assuming "natural" Central African leadership following the death of former Gabonese President Omar Bongo. As suggested ref C, Biya's regional activism may reflect domestic political signaling and concern for his legacy more than a new interest in regional affairs. That said, Cameroon does have interests at stake in its relationship with the region, not the least of which is keeping its neighbors at peace. As one of the more stable, prosperous, and strategically located countries in the area, Cameroon is likely to stay engaged bilaterally while continuing on the track of what Biya called the "wise slowness" of regional integration efforts.
GARVEY